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UNCLAS AMMAN 001080

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STATE FOR NEA/RA LAWSON, OES/PCI PAYNE  
STATE PASS USAID/OFDA

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: SENV AMGT FAID JO  
SUBJECT: QUAKE SHAKES AMMAN; NO DAMAGE REPORTED

Ref: 03 Amman 6522

¶11. At 1015 local, on Wednesday, February 11, a 4.9 magnitude earthquake surprised many of Jordan's inhabitants and prompted many to vacate buildings. The Jordan Seismological Observatory of the Natural Resources Authority and the Public Security Directorate told us that there has been no damage reported in Amman or elsewhere in the Kingdom. No injuries have been attributed to the earthquake.

¶12. The epicenter of the quake, which lasted for several seconds, was at the northeast edge of the Dead Sea, partly explaining why Amman, only 35 miles (or a half hour's drive) from the location, felt it more than such occasional events of similar magnitude often based further south in Wadi Araba. The Seismological Observatory confirmed that there were seven aftershocks, all registering below 2.0 on the Richter scale. While Jordanian seismologists believe there will be additional small aftershocks, they were quick to point out that this series of events represents "normal activity" for the Rift Valley.

¶13. The quake, registered at 31.679 degrees North and 35.585 degrees East, was at a depth of 20.9 kilometers, according to the Seismological Observatory. Local seismologists corroborated their findings with their Israeli counterparts at the Geophysical Institute of Israel, something they do routinely in such instances. The U.S. Geological Survey, in information posted on its website, registered the earthquake at 5.2 magnitude, with a depth of 15 kilometers and location of 31.631 degrees North, 35.469 degrees East.

¶14. In response to the event, the Jordanian government closed public schools for the remainder of the day, but other commercial and government activity continues as normal. We are hearing that some potentially vulnerable high-rise buildings are being evacuated. Regional Science Officer's contacts within the Palestinian Authority in Gaza told us that their government offices were ordered closed for the rest of the day, as a precaution against additional aftershocks.

¶15. Post did not evacuate the chancery. Personnel inspected embassy facilities, residences and the American Community School for damage, but found none. The telephone tree was activated to inform members of the official community that the event was an earthquake and dispel rumors. NEA Admin counselors, meeting at one of Jordan's Dead Sea hotels, were evacuated until such time as hotel management conducted a building assessment and declared it safe to return inside.

¶16. COMMENT: The Rift Valley is well known to have significant seismic activity, some of which reaches magnitudes high enough to rattle citizens of the region. Only last month, Jordan recorded another earthquake of about 4.7 magnitude at the southern end of the Dead Sea, but that was not felt in Amman. Such frequent activity underscores the need for appropriate building codes to reduce earthquake losses, an objective of one of our Middle East Regional Cooperation projects between Israel and Jordan. The recent UNESCO/USGS regional conference on Reducing Earthquake Losses in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, hosted in Aqaba, could not have been more timely. Reftel reports on earthquake risk in Jordan generally.

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